Questioning the teaching of "question intonation": the case of classroom elicitations

Conference or Workshop Item

QUESTIONING THE TEACHING OF "QUESTION INTONATION": THE CASE OF CLASSROOM ELICITATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In pronunciation textbooks for EFL teachers and learners, "question intonation" has been most widely associated to syntactic structure and attitudinal meanings. Even though these descriptions may refer to frequent realisations in real life, they appear to assume that all interrogatively-formatted utterances fulfil only informational functions and work similarly across different contexts. This reflective paper will make a critical review of the descriptions of "question intonation" in a selection of theoretical and practical materials employed in the Phonetics modules in three graduate Teacher Training programmes to contrast them to the findings of a short conversation/ discourse-analytic study on teacher questions in classroom discourse, as representative of one of the speech genres EFL teachers are trained in. Finally, a case will be made for the need for further corpus-based descriptions of intonation that focus on social action in situated contexts of language use.

Keywords: intonation, questions, elicitations, teacher training, classroom discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

"There is no such thing as question intonation", Cruttenden [7, p.59] categorically asserted. However, "question intonation" is presented as something apparently easily definable and predictable in many English Language Teaching instructional materials.

The simplifying assumptions found in these textbooks differ with the complex reality of question form and use, since questions "can be used for actions other than questioning, and questioning can be accomplished by linguistic forms other than questions" [26, p.34]. What is more, many of the accounts in these textbooks are based on de-contextualised and artificial examples, and arguably, many of the descriptions are introspective in nature, since there is no explicit reference to corpus work.

The current paper will present a review of "question intonation" in a selection of intonation manuals and activity books. The descriptions made in these materials will be problematised, and confronted with the results of a small-scale corpus study of teacher questions in one particular form of institutional talk: classroom discourse.

This study converges with previous discourse and interactional research on intonation [11, 18, 33, 29] and on intonation in questions [6, 31], that describe how prosodic choices both project, and are constrained by, the wider context of culture (i.e. genre) [10, 12], as well as by the specifics of the here-and-now emerging context of interaction. Therefore, this reflective paper will finally propose that descriptions of those intonation choices that have a certain regularity and systematicity should be presented to learners alongside the descriptions of the social and structural organisation of particular occasions of language use, with a focus on verbal and non-verbal social action [28].

2. QUESTIONS IN INTONATION MATERIALS

This section will review the description of "question intonation" in a selection of materials comprising the set bibliography in the Phonetics and Phonology modules at three Teacher Training Colleges in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. These materials are expected to inform teacher trainees' choices of intonation in different speech situations, including "teacher talk".

	Syntactic	Attitudinal	Functional	
			Discourse control / Info status	Linguistic action
Baker [2]	✓	✓	(✓)	
Brazil [4, 5]		(✓)	✓	
Hewings [13]			✓	
O'Connor and Arnold [22]	✓	✓		
Wells [32]	✓	✓	(✓)	
Tench [29, 30]	(✓)	(✓)	✓	✓

Figure 1: Criteria associated to "question intonation" in pronunciation/intonation materials

2.1 Syntactic accounts of question intonation

Most of the materials scrutinised assume a one-to-one mapping between intonation and grammatical form. Falls are associated with wh-questions, and to the final item in a closed alternative question [22, 32, 2] and the use of non-falls is ascribed to the expression of attitudinal stance, making the question "more gentle, kindly encouraging" [32, p.43].

In [22, 32, 2], rises and fall-rises are said to belong in yes/no questions, and on the first items in closed

alternative questions, or on all the items in open alternative questions.

According to [32], it is the use of rises that marks *declarative* questions as such, though Brazil [4, 5] and Tench [29, 30] acknowledge the common use of falls in these. The inclusion of "declaratives" is the only hint in these materials so far that questions may not just be effected through interrogatively-formatted structures.

2.2 Attitudinal accounts of question intonation

Attitudinal approaches to tone include the association of intonational contours with displays of affect, emotion, and social solidarity or distance. This is a criterion some materials resort almost fully to [22] or combine with syntactic criteria [32], whereas others approach this in a functional way [4, 5, 29, 30].

Low falling tones on wh-questions are said to be indicative of "briskness", "seriousness", "urgency", "disapproval" [22, 32], whereas high falling tones are "business-like", "insistent", "interested" [22, 32]. On yes/no questions, falls are used for "urgent discussion", "scepticism", "protest", [22], as expressions of "surprise" or "pleasure" [13], or to establish forms of social divergence [4,5].

Rises and fall-rises on wh-questions display "interest" and "friendliness" [22], but with a low head the speaker may seem "disapproving and resentful". In wh- or yes/no phatic questions -enquiries about social wellbeing-, rising tones establish convergence and "insinuate togetherness" [4, p.79].

2.3 Functional accounts of question intonation

Functional descriptions of question intonation are far less common in the materials scrutinised and are associated to the traditions of either Discourse Intonation [4, 5, 26] or Systemic Functional Linguistics [29, 30]. Functional accounts could be broadly classified into two sub-criteria: information status and discourse control, and linguistic actions.

2.3.1 Questions and discourse control and/or information status

In terms of information status, the most widely developed account is by Brazil [4, 5], associating falling tones to *finding out* and rising tones to *making sure* questions, thus postulating the independence between tone and syntax. Falling tones mark the matter of the question as unnegotiated, and the answer that will be provided is expected to change the state of listener-hearer convergence, moving interaction forward.

Rising tones, also known as "checking" tones, request confirmation of a hypothesis or previous understanding [4, 5, 13]. For Brazil [4, 5], the choice of which rising tone is used in questions is related to discourse control, that is, the freedom to make greater linguistic choices: fall-rises are used to "avoid overt assumption of superiority" [4, p.95], and thus, questions with this tone are heard as a "request for the favour of a reply" [4, p.94], whereas rises are seen as questions presented "as of right".

The connection between rising tones and given information also briefly appears in connection to echo, repetition, independent-elliptical, and please-repeat questions in [22, 32, 2]. However, these authors associate attitudinal labels such as "surprise" and "incredulity" to these uses.

Tench [29, 30] considers falling tones to be associated with speaker dominance, which he relates to speaker knowledge. Falls are used when the speaker focuses on what is known -e.g. the presupposed part of a wh-question- and requests what is unknown. Rises, on the other hand, express a speaker's deference to the hearer's better knowledge.

2.3.1 Questions and linguistic action

Of all the materials reviewed, only [29] makes an explicit, systematic connection between linguistic action and tone, especially in the realm of "suasion", extending beyond information exchange. Falling tones emphasise the knowledge dominance of the speaker, and this is used in conducive questions -acting as covert opinions-, guesses, denials, prompts, lead-ins to stories or jokes, second-repeats, and second-attempt questions, and recommendations.

On the other hand, rises are found in invitations, requests, and offers, deferring authority to the addressee [29, 30]. For Brazil [4] these goods-and-services questions carry rises when asked "for the benefit of the hearer", whereas when it is the speaker who "gains" from the answer, fall-rises are preferred.

The review of materials above has revealed the following underlying assumptions: a) questions are generally instantiated as interrogative forms; b) the grammar of the question may define its intonational contour; c) the intonation of a question may also be contingent on social, attitudinal or informational concerns; d) the intonation of questions is somehow predictable, beyond the context of use. And, based on the scrutiny of the examples provided in these textbooks: e) questions are generally produced as one intonation phrase (IP), except for alternative questions, and those with a "non-final" level tone [22] followed by a final rising or falling tone. In the sections that follow, the applicability of these descriptions will be evaluated in one particular institutional form of talk: classroom discourse.

3. QUESTIONS IN "TEACHER TALK"

The singularity of the structure of classroom interaction has been widely described [1, 8, 9, 18, 19, 25,26,27]. The most popular model establishes that the classroom exchange is typically organised around three moves: Initiation, Response and Follow-up (IRF) [26], and these generally occur in whole-class "recitations" of information testing and recalling [20].

In a corpus study, Alexander [1] found that recitations were generally brief and that "teachers moved from one child to another in rapid succession in order to maximise participation, or from one question to another in the interests of maintaining pace" (p.99). Since teachers often know the answers [14], students have to "match the questioner's knowledge, or fall within those parameters" [17, p. 286], which is why these are known as *test* [20, 21], *recitation* [8,9,20] or *display* [14] questions. Two other types can be established in terms of a possible "prescriptiveness" of the answer: questions to which there is no closed answer are called *referential* [14], or *authentic* [20,21]; and *uptake* questions, that incorporate a student's previous answer as a way of "facilitating the negotiation of understandings" [21, p.146]. Conversation Analysis (CA) studies have observed that these question-types cannot be identified as such until the Follow-up move [18, 19], as it reveals the teacher's orientation to the students' answer, which in itself uncovers how the student interpreted the question.

A second CA-relevant classification centres around teacher control in speaker selection and turn-taking, and divides questions into *individual nomination questions, invitations to bid,* and *invitations to reply* [17]. Individual nomination questions are addressed to a particular student, whereas invitations to bid are questions requesting voluntary participation; invitations to reply, on the other hand, allow students to freely self-select to provide the answer straightforwardly. In the following section, these categories will be cross-matched to the descriptions of questions above.

4. METHODOLOGY

For this exploratory study, a short corpus (33 minutes) of Key Stage 2 British classroom interactions was scrutinised. The 90 teacher-led elicitation tokens found were collected from 7 whole-class recitations acting as revisions, or lead-ins. The lesson segments were selected from two YouTube channels: LessonsinObservation [15], and MediaMergeLtd [16]. Both companies claim to have obtained informed consent for online publication.

In-keeping with the qualitative methodologies privileged in DA and CA, questions were classified according to the types already discussed, and coding decisions made after turn-by-turn analyses of sequential positioning in the exchange, student orientation, and teacher feedback. Consistently with other studies of social action, non-interrogatively formatted items acting as questions were also included, so the term "elicitation" will be preferred.

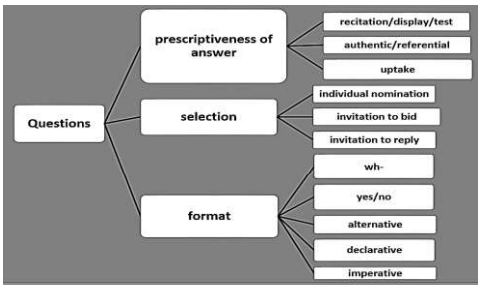


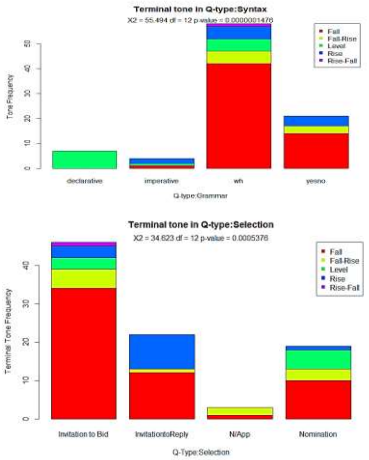
Figure 2: Classification of elicitations in the data

Each question was transcribed, divided into IPs and its tone contours were specified according to those described in British school of intonation [22, 32]: fall, rise, fall-rise, rise-fall, level. Impressionistic observations were validated instrumentally with Praat [3]. The initial exploration of data revealed the presence of type-conflated, multi-IP questions, which posed the need for further intonational detail, so the specification of IP numbers for each question, and the tone produced in each, were added.

Apart from qualitative analyses, basic inferential statistics were run in order to establish possible relations between terminal tone (i.e. tone in the last IP) and the different question types in the data.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As expected, the data reveal several complexities that cannot be easily predicted by the above descriptions of question intonation. A selection of these issues will be addressed below.



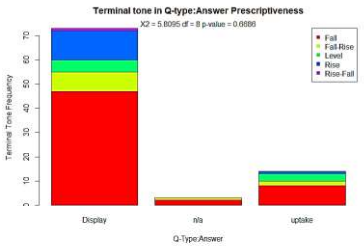


Figure 3. Tone and question types: frequency and chi-square test results.

A simple glance over the results might misleadingly confirm a straightforward relation between terminal tone and syntax, and with question type:selection, with a smaller likelihood of a connection between tone and question type:answer. However, statistics can be deceptive when these questions are seen in the sequential verbal and non-verbal context of their production, and in terms of the specifics of their formatting.

The fact that over half (57.8%) of the elicitations were produced as more than IP led to the problematisation of the role of terminal tone. Most questions were generally complex, made of an *invitation to bid* followed by a *display* question in the same syntactic structure, and these were also signalled by intonation: the *invitations to bid* had their own IP, with a fall-rise (58%), a level tone (25%), a fall (8.5%) or a rise (8.5%), and the upcoming display part of the elicitation generally carried a fall (92%), whether it was a yes/no, or a wh-question -including *rear-loaded Wh-questions* (Margutti, 2006 in [6]).

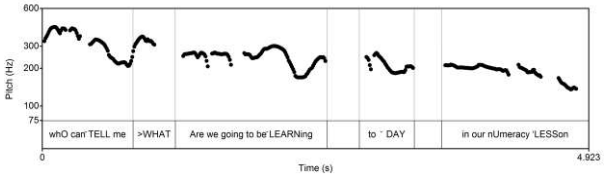


Figure 3: A complex multi-IP question. Capitals on syllables mark the nuclei. (Y6Maths_57)

An examination of non-verbal behaviour also contributed to the questioning of the defining role of terminal tone. In some cases, the timing of anticipatory student bidding was found to be a marker of projectability, indicating that the function and content of the question were made relevant before the last IP was produced. This was also supported by teacher's gaze direction as the question was being staged. Their monitoring of student bids and immediate nomination after the end of the question may render these final falls as markers of turn-transition, while the previous IPs with either fall-rising or level tones may have been employed to give students time to process the question and bid. Thus, in this respect, tones appear to bear an organisational role over any grammatical or attitudinal association, with falling tones "advancing" [27] the lesson. This makes sense with what has been described for recitations, where the teacher's control over the whole class and the preference for progressivity are foregrounded [1, 8, 9, 20, 21].

What is more, Tench's [29, 30] reference to knowledge dominance and the notion of "conducive questions" (also covered in [6]) appear to be better suited to the discussion of display questions, as it cannot be argued that falling tones mark these as truly "finding out" [5], unless we consider display questions as elicitations whose information gap lies in the teacher's need to know if the topic is clear, or easily recallable [8]. It is clear, nonetheless, that except for the "businesslike" nature of these questions in recitation, none of the attitudinal labels proposed in the above materials seem to characterise these classroom elicitations.

Rising tones were frequently found in the few (19%) individually-nominated yes/no *uptake* elicitations. Even though these are concerned with already-negotiated information, it is not the teacher's own "making sure" function that is expressed, but they are presented as invitations to check, correct, or fine-tune the answers given, symbolically "deferring" to the learner's knowledge to try again. Some of these were formatted as closed alternative questions, following the rising + falling patterns described.

The only clear syntax-tone correlation occurred in level-tone declaratives, which were in fact *designedly incomplete utterances* [DIU, 19], acting as "fill in the blanks" invitations to reply, answered in unison.

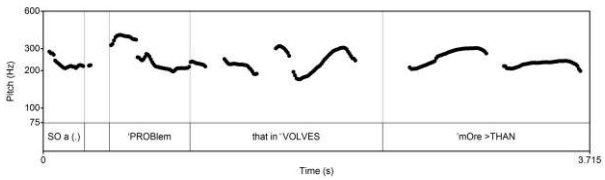


Figure 4: Level-tone declaratives (Y5Maths_75).

6. FINAL REMARKS

The use and formatting of elicitations is distinctive in "teacher talk". Situated studies of questions in different episodes of everyday social action can, and have shed light into characteristic tonality and tone patterns that can only be made sense of if they are embedded on a particular occasion of talk, and not on "context-free notions of grammar, meaning and function"[28, p.150]. As ELT materials have done for the teaching of grammar, lexis and structure for different *written* genres, the role of intonation as an essential part of meaning-making in speech needs to be taught in close relation to in particular episodes of situated language use and speech styles[11], with a focus on social action.

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